

Utah has a share in the shame: Topaz

On the 40th anniversary of the defeat of Japan, a few shameful memories remain to tarnish what Americans like to remember as the "Good War."

One is Topaz, a deceptively pretty name for a dismal spot in the Utah desert where white Americans put Japanese Americans in a concentration camp.

Soon after Pearl Harbor, thousands of Japanese-Americans, along with Japanese aliens, were loaded on trains and shipped to camps scattered throughout the West. Despite many of the younger internees being born in America, they were considered dangerous people.

Two Americans closely involved

with Topaz met on KUED Channel 7's Civic Dialogue program to reminisce about Topaz. The program is produced in cooperation with the Desert News.

"We had our citizenship, but still, we were Japanese," said Doris Matsuura, who was shipped from California to spend the duration of the war in the harsh landscape of Topaz. "I don't think there was a soul there who would think of trading his loyalty for Japan."

One of the obvious discrepancies of the internment camp experience was that the Japanese were singled out from German-Americans and Italian-Americans for the severe treatment.

"You soon began to realize that

here was a group of people who had been subjected to discrimination," said Claud Pratt, a Utahn who worked at the camp and became close to the internees.

"I felt like they didn't judge us as individuals," said Mrs. Matsuura.

To make matters worse, the Japanese internees ran into hatred in Utah. Mrs. Matsuura remembers a bus trip to Salt Lake City. She had been given permission to work to help support her sick mother at Topaz.

"The people on the bus looked at me and said, 'That's a Jap,'" she remembers. "They spit on me."

"I remembered thinking that some people do not have compassion. They

do not have feelings for others."

Pratt said his wife ran into similar problems when she took young Japanese from the camp into Delta for movies. And he himself remembers a sign in a Provo restaurant, "NO JAPS SERVED HERE."

"We just misunderstood them as a people," Pratt said.

Mrs. Matsuura's hardest memory is of her mother trying to understand the experience.

"I just can't understand it," her mother told her children. "I can understand why they would put me in a camp, but why my children, who are American citizens?"